

Standing up for the gypsies

The largest illegal travellers' camp in Britain has found a divine ally in its survival battle. **Jerome Taylor** reports

Margaret McCarthy, with her son Dan, at Dale Farm. Father John Glynn, inset, a local Catholic priest wants to reconcile the gypsies and the local residents

TERI PENGILLEY



TO SAY that Marianne McCarthy is house proud would be something of an understatement. The dainty gravel garden outside her two bedroom pre-fab is immaculately kept, boasting two freshly painted miniature canons and a host of cheerful garden gnomes to greet her visitors. Step through her front door and the inside of the house is spotless. A gleaming white kitchen with clear plastic stools leads into a sparse but welcoming sitting room where a simple crucifix, two chandeliers and an embroidered "God Bless Home" sign are the room's only adornments.

It's a far cry from what outsiders might expect the 68-year-old widow's home to look like. "Most people think this area will be filthy, with rubbish and sewage and everything," she says. "They think we're dangerous and that you have to come with bullet proof vests. Over the years we've had to put up with all sort of accusations." Mrs McCarthy expects people to have a negative perception of her modest dwelling because the "estate" on which she lives, Dale Farm, where she has called home for the past seven years, is the largest illegal gypsy site in the country.

Part of the former scrap yard site

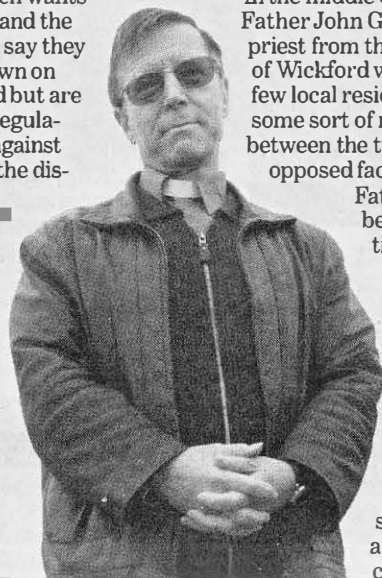
near the village of Crays Hill, Essex, has been legally home to a small number of British-born Irish traveller for more than 20 years. But problems began in 2001 when a number of new families arrived and expanded the site well beyond its legal limits into the greenbelt.

Since then the site has mushroomed and become the centre of a monumental legal battle between Basildon Council, which wants the gypsies removed, and the 86 illegal families who say they are trying to settle down on legally purchased land but are stymied by planning regulations that are biased against them. Over the years the dispute

has become more and more acrimonious, with settled residents from Crays Hill accusing the travellers of resorting to intimidation tactics and crime to drive them away and their house prices down. The gypsies, in return, say they are victims of a well orchestrated smear campaign that resorts to long defined negative stereotypes of traveller culture.

In the middle of all this is Father John Glynn, a Catholic priest from the nearby village of Wickford who is among the few local residents calling for some sort of reconciliation between the two bitterly opposed factions.

Father John believes it is high time British politicians found a way to solve the country's traveller problems. "Basildon might win this round and force these families out but they'll only go somewhere else and the cycle will continue," he says.



"The most important thing to happen is for people's perceptions to alter"

FATHER JOHN GLYNN
LOCAL PRIEST

Part of the problem, the soft spoken priest explains, is that the settled community rarely takes the time to get to know travellers, who themselves remain deeply suspicious of outsiders and often come across as hostile. In a bid to reverse the two side's ignorance of each other, Father John is hosting a series of meetings with the Bishop of Brentwood where travellers and members of the public can meet face to face.

"You can't change the culture overnight but the most important thing that needs to happen is for people's perceptions to alter," he says. "Things simply cannot remain the way they have. I would go so far as to say that British gypsies are being ethnically cleansed. The message we are sending them is 'We don't like your ways, we don't want you here and we want you to move on'. It's astonishing. We'd never say that to immigrant communities but for some reason we're unwilling to respect the specific cultural aspects of gypsies because they look the same as us."

Margaret McCarthy (the McCarthys are one of about five extended families that live on Dale Farm), a mother of five who lives next door to Marianne, is among a handful of gypsies who says she is willing to meet members

of the settled community through Father John.

"If it means people will understand us better I'm willing to do it," she says. "I trust Father John and I'm sure he knows what's best. All we want is a place to call home, a place where our children can become educated."

But convincing the outside world that they mean no harm will be difficult. David Walsh and his wife Jill live next to a smaller gypsy encampment down the road which is part of the same legal battle with Basildon Council. Although things have quietened down over the past two years, he has recorded more than 200 incidences where he and his wife have been threatened or intimidated.

"In this area I'm not sure whether there could ever be any reconciliation because there's just too much water under the bridge," he says. But Mr Walsh does agree that Britain's politicians need to do something quickly.

"If anything I'm more annoyed with them for not accepting the situation, or doing anything about it," he says. "On a personal level, if the court cases go our way, our problem with the gypsies might be over in a couple of years. But the problem will go on and on."